

JOSEP SEBASTIÀ PONS

ÀLEX SUSANNA AUTHOR

NOW I AM LIKE THE BIRD

Now I am like the bird whom song deserts
whose weary flight on faltering wings
no longer cleaves the air
and who remains uncaring on his perch.

While, in the green garden of spring,
I pecked the seed of disenchantment,
the fleeting breeze
left off its dwindling call.

Now the moment's pearl evaporates
and ruby-red desire grow misty.
The murmur of the water in the torrent
is trapped beyond the hour by silence.

For I have lost the words of freedom,
and in the silent dampness of the valley,
the memory of my voyage
lies scattered like the fragments of a mirror.

And now my life contains a sweet
awareness of my fate,
as I watch the live moon hurrying
above the wind-lashed trees.

Translation: Andrew Langdon-Davies

Josep Sebastià Pons (Illa del Riberal, Roussillon, 1886-1962) is undoubtedly one of the great Catalan poets of this century. However, what now seems almost unquestionable was for many years the opinion of a minority. His work has to be placed in an "extraterritorial" context –French Roussillon–, which may in part explain the delay with which he has been fully recognized. Only now, when any reader can enter a bookshop and find the three beautiful volumes of his *Poesia Completa*, his *Teatre Complet* and his

Prosa Completa, can we say that the work of Josep Sebastià Pons has managed to overcome a certain indifference amongst publishers and finally entered the normal channels. In fact, and however paradoxical it may seem, few Catalan poets are available in such perfect editions, both in the critical and the aesthetic senses of the word, as these by Pons, produced thanks to an exemplary collaboration between the Regional Council of Languedoc-Roussillon and the *Generalitat de Catalunya*. Although Pons is also a playwright of

some interest and, at the same time, stands out as a prose-writer (as we can see in his *Llibre de les set sivelles*, 1956, *Concert d'été*, 1950, and his autobiography *L'oiseau tranquille*, 1987, originally written in French), and as a researcher (even today his thesis *La littérature catalane en Roussillon au XVII et au XVIII siècle*, 1929, is the best ever written on the period), there is no doubt that it is in poetry that he achieved his best literary results.

While forming a highly homogeneous whole, there is, in my opinion, a water-



double one, and the poet was fully aware of the second of these: it was necessary to "elevate" —as Pons himself says in *L'oiseau tranquille*— the "language of the earth" to its highest expressive virtues.

The start of a new season in his life, as I said earlier, involved inevitable changes; changes in his attitude towards the landscape that surrounded him and changes in the poetry it inspired. Now, rather than dissolve his identity in fervorous, half-pagan, half-Franciscan contemplation of nature, the poet sees in it the reflection of his own human experience. It almost seems as if, having completely interiorized the landscape, the poet no longer feels the need to praise it, to "fix it", and instead makes use of it to fix himself, so to speak, at a delicate moment when he begins to realise that the equator of his life is behind him. And while until then he had written excellent landscape poetry with successful incursions into the rich world of native folklore, it now acquired, especially after *Cantilena* (published in a bilingual edition by Gallimard in 1963) a breadth and a human and moral depth —we might say that his problems as a human being came to the fore— which gave it a greater intensity. When all is said and done, a poet's worth depends only on his powers of expression, and it was especially in this second stage that he perfected them.

Pons was fifty when *Cantilena* was published, and he was well aware of it. As he says in his marvellous autobiography, *L'oiseau tranquille*, "On ne parvient jamais à la plénitude de la vie, sans sentir ce qu'on laisse derrière soi, sans qu'une buée légère ne s'installe dans le champ de la pensée. C'est dans ce sentiment ou cet état d'esprit, et sans la moindre hâte, comme si tout avait pris du recul, que j'écrivais alors la brève suite de *Cantilena*. J'y découvrais ma plus juste expression. Il ne s'agissait plus de vaincre une difficulté, ce qui suppose toujours un exercice, mais de capter ma propre voix". From then on, though, his rate of production dropped considerably, and even this difficulty in composing became one of his recurrent themes. ("Now I am like the bird whom song deserts", says one of his best poems, in *Conversa*. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that this "evasive muse" was to provide him with his

best work. The poems in *Cantilena*, *Conversa* (1950), *Contrapunt* (1960) and *Cambra d'hivern* (1966) must form one of the most intense and morally charged cycles in the poetry of the twentieth century. The sudden loss of his wife, the gradual fading of his memory, the interiorization of the landscape surrounding him, attention to the more "humble and brief" things of life, the ever slower and more helpless passage of time, the loneliness of old age, passive acceptance of all that life had to offer him, and the difficulty of song are some of the pillars of this period of maturity in Pons's poetry.

But what general characteristic makes Josep Sebastià Pons stand out in the context of modern Catalan poetry? Perhaps the fact that, like no other, his work contains a "sagesse", a set of "rules for life" that are gradually shaped by time and the most profound and decisive events of his life. Reading it is one of the most gratifying experiences the reader of poetry can hope for; but at the same time we come up against a poet whose work seems to contain great human wisdom, I would almost say the maximum human wisdom conceivable. Everyone can get something from life; one gets the impression that Pons managed to discover all the poetry in his own. And this can only be explained by the fact that Pons, in turn, devoted an entire life to the construction of his work. Behind each poem there are endless walks, hours of loneliness, and silence, and meditation, and restraint, and ironic resignation. Because only he who has devoted himself to the task of living life and thinking life (the *mestiere*, as Pavese would say), of meditating on it, of remembering it unceasingly, with instinctive and silent tenacity, with resignation, with that "sweet understanding of fate" that overcomes the "bird of faltering wing" when it loses "the words of freedom and the memory of its voyage", as he says in one of the poems mentioned above, "*Ara som com l'ocell*", is given everything that can be learned from life. Pons's work floats, then, in silence but, at heart, surely and majestically like few others, over the landscape of the Catalan literature of our century and asserts itself as one of the most personal and intense poetic adventures ever. ■

shed in the poetry of Josep Sebastià Pons —the awareness of having past the mid-point of his life and consequently of having begun a new season— which makes it possible to speak of two periods. During the first, which is of a descriptive, objectivist nature —*Roses i Xiprers* (1911), *El bon pedrís* (1919), *L'estel de l'escamot* (1921), *Canta Perdiu* (1925) and *L'aire i la fulla* (1930)—, the poet keeps up an intense, prolonged dialogue with all the "unique places" which, as Cesare Pavese says in *Feria d'agosto*, shape the points of reference of the poet's imagination. This period is characterized by the need to demarcate a territory: the "sacred" space in which the poet's imagination was to dwell from then on. It is an affirmative, constructive, one might even say exultant period, since it shares in the joy inherent in any act of creation and baptism. This is what Pons achieves in his first books, and, I might say, with a double effort, since to the need to demarcate his own poetic space, we have to add the need to create a suitably ductile language with which to reflect it. The reconstruction is therefore a